

# Experiences of Being a Mother: Meanings of Childbirth, Pain and Birth

## *Experiências de Ser Mãe: Significados de Parto, Dor e Nascimento*

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### **Abstract**

The experiences of delivery and birth profoundly shape the lives of women, couple and family. The objective of this study is to understand the meanings attributed to childbirth, pain and birth, by Portuguese and immigrant women in Portugal, and identify the meanings and feelings experienced by the woman who becomes a mother. It is a qualitative study, resorting to semi-structured interviews and content analysis, to 60 immigrant and 22 Portuguese women, supported by Nvivo10. The results suggest that the meanings of childbirth, labour pains, and birth are diverse and ambivalent, according to the experience of each woman. Labour pains presented disparate meanings between being horrible or necessary, but rewarding. Often perceived as painful, from the processes of labour and delivery, also surfaced positive/rewarding sensations and feelings, ranging from anxiety to happiness, or a good and unforgettable experience. Childbirth was associated with more negative perceptions than birth, but both were more positive than negative meanings.

**Keywords:** Experiences; Labour; Pain; Birth.

### **Resumo**

*As experiências do parto e nascença moldam profundamente as vidas de mulheres, casais e famílias. O objeto deste estudo é entender os*

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*sentidos atribuídos ao parto e nascença, das mulheres portuguesas e imigrantes no Portugal, e a identificação dos sentidos e sentimentos vivenciados pelas mulheres que se tornaram mães. É um estudo qualitativo, recorrendo às entrevistas semiestruturadas e análises de conteúdo, sendo estes para 30 mulheres imigrantes e 22 portuguesas, suportado pelo Nvivo10. Os resultados indicam que o sentido do parto, as dores do parto e a nascença são diversos e ambivalentes, de acordo com as experiências de cada mulher. As dores do parto apresentam sentidos diferentes, sendo eles divididos entre necessários ou horríveis, mas recompensadores. Geralmente percebido como doloroso, as dores do parto demonstram também uma sensação de emoção positiva e recompensador, variando entre ansiedade à felicidade, ou experiências boas e inesquecíveis. O parto foi associado com sentidos de uma percepção mais negativa à nascença, porém os dois tiveram sentidos mais positivos do que negativos.*

*Palavras-Chave: Experiências; Parto; Dor; Nascença.*

The demand for better living conditions for themselves and their family, in relation to economic, housing and educational stability, the better health care and to meet the spouse, are factors that commonly cause women to emigrate (Coutinho et al., 2012). Away from their support network and their family environment, immigrant women live differently the transition process to motherhood, and the experience of labour (Coutinho & Parreira, 2011) assigning different meanings to life experience and hospital settings where the delivery takes place. This reality brings out the importance of the cultural care advocated by Leininger (1991), which combines cultural diversity and universality, to nursing care, creating culturally congruent care that respects the values, beliefs and behaviour patterns associated with the culture in which it is inserted. Meleis (2010) believes that nursing should facilitate the transition process experienced by people in different life contexts. In this particular situation, immigrant women are experiencing two transitions: motherhood and immigration (Coutinho & Parreira, 2010).

The meaning assigned to labour and birth depends on several factors such as the woman's personality, her culture, her previous experiences, among others, which is why during these experiences, the focus of nursing care, can never be confined solely to physical aspects. It is important to appreciate how women experience these private, intense, emotion filled moments and feelings, which are often accompanied by pain and suffering.

The transformations of the body schema are marked by the separation between mother and son. The way the mother symbolized the child and her own personality will also dictate the way she behaves and interprets the lived moment. In this sense, the experience of childbirth is also influenced by the sociocultural context, physical and psychological individuality of the woman in labour and the context in which it takes place (Rodrigues, 2008; Santos, Caroline, & Pagliarini, 2008). The pain is interpreted in different ways and intensities, and regarding the pain of childbirth, different women of different cultural contexts, have different opinions, feelings and experiences (Christiaens & Bracke, 2007). In turn, the birth can translate relief, often expressed by happiness, which sometimes is associated with birth and the physical presence of a live and healthy baby (Barros, 2008). Even if the childbirth was painful, the birth of the child, associated with the pleasure of exercising motherhood, the feeling of self-fulfilment, the outburst of wonder that babies cause in mothers and the feeling of complete happiness, makes many women quickly forget labour (Rodrigues, Montesuma, & Silva, 2001). Thus, becoming a mother become is an experience lived with mixed feelings, which for most women are of happiness, love, care, protection and gratification (Mendes, 2009; Velho, Santos, Bruggemann, & Camargo, 2012). The transition to motherhood is a very demanding task in the life cycle of a woman, consisting of a phase (Mendes, 2009) where her previous identity is threatened and new elements must be integrated (Duarte, 2009). To Canavarro (2001), the continuing accommodation between expectations and reality by the woman who becomes a mother is experienced differently by each woman, being also very important to highlight how each one experiences the time of delivery and the baby's birth. These emotions, according to this author, condition the behaviours and when they are experienced during a painful process, they influence the perception and the meaning attributed to said experience. Therefore, the experience of labour and birth have different meanings and impacts for women and even for the same woman, in separate experiences (Gama, Giffin, Angulo-Tuesta, Barbosa, & d'Orsi, 2009; Mutti, 2010).

In this context the aims of this study were to understand the meanings attributed to childbirth, labour pain and birth, by Portuguese and immigrant women, and identify the meanings and feelings experienced by the woman who becomes a mother.

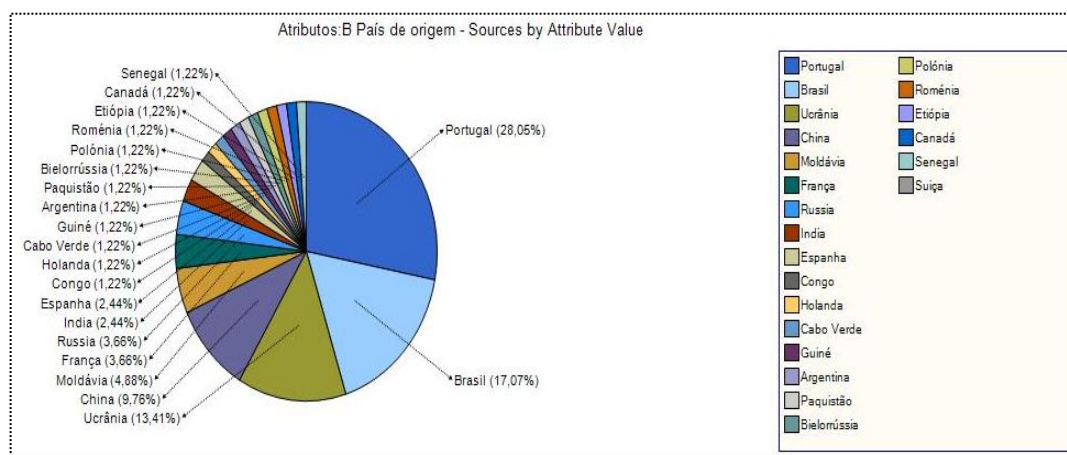
## **Participants and methods**

This study is part of a research protocol, of a qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory nature. The sample comprises of 82 women, 22 of which are Portuguese and 60 are immigrants,

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from two districts of the Central Region of Portugal (Figure 1). Inclusion criteria were: being a Portuguese or immigrant women in Portugal, recent (less than a year) mothers, understanding Portuguese, and to accept being a part of the study

**Figure 1. Percentage of Women Interviewed by Country of Origin**



Source: The Author

In Table 1 we present some data of the Socio-demographic and Obstetric Characterization of s participants.

**Table 1. Socio-Demographic and Obstetric Characterization of S Participants (Continue...)**

	PORTUGUESE n (22)	IMMIGRANT n (60)	TOTAL n (82)
<b>AGE GROUP</b>			
< 21	0	1	1
21-35	18	43	61
> 35	4	16	20
<b>MARITAL STATUS</b>			
Married/De facto union	20	49	69
Single/divorced/widowed	2	11	13
<b>ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS</b>			
≤ 9º grade	6	13	19
10-12º grades	3	17	20
Higher Education	13	30	43
<b>PROFESSIONAL STATUS</b>			
Employed	19	44	63
Unemployed	3	16	19
<b>PROFESSED RELIGION</b>			
Catholic	20	24	44
Non Catholic	0	31	31
Agnostic	2	5	7
<b>PREGNANCY PLANNING</b>			
Planned Pregnancy	20	40	60
Unplanned Pregnancy	2	20	22
<b>MONITORING OF PREGNANCY</b>			
Monitored pregnancy	20	41	61
Unmonitored pregnancy	2	19	21

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	PORTUGUESE n (22)	IMMIGRANT n (60)	TOTAL n (82)
<b>ACCOMPANYING PERSON IN DELIVERY</b>			
With company	14	38	52
Without company	8	22	30
<b>Nº GESTATIONS</b>			
1 gestation	13	22	35
2 gestation	8	21	29
3 or more gestation	1	17	18
<b>Nº DELIVERIES</b>			
1 deliveries	13	29	42
2 deliveries	8	20	28
3 deliveries	1	11	12
<b>TYPE OF DELIVERY</b>			
Normal birth	8	37	45
Obstructed labour, dystocia	7	8	15
Caesarean	7	15	22

Fonte: O Autor

Data collection was conducted between February 2011 and February 2012, through semi-structured interviews, a weekly average of 1.5 interviews. The guiding instrument consisted of socio-demographic characterization and of seven or eight open questions (depending on the participant be Portuguese or immigrant, respectively), in order to get the data in the speech of the informants themselves. The interviews took place at the Health Centres involved, with varied duration 45-125 minutes with a mean of 70 minutes.

Data analysis was based on categorical analysis technique of content analysis (Bardin, 2013), with the support of *Qualitative Analyses Software e Certified Partner* (QSR NVivo version 10) program. Similar ideas were systematized and codified by registration unit (UR) and their categorization.

This study was approved by the ethics committees of the health centres involved in the study. The interview instrument was previously submitted to the National Commission for Data Protection and authorization was obtained for its implementation (Case 85/2011, No. 191/2011). The data confidentiality and anonymity of participants were guaranteed. The informed for the interview and recording verbatim consent was obtained after full information about the study. To maintain anonymity, each participant was identified by two letters of the alphabet, followed by their nationality (e.g. DC Ukraine).

## Results

This study had as emerging results of the analysis and coding of verbatim participants, the categories that are presented in Table 2 and translate the meanings attributed to childbirth, expressed the same feelings, meanings attributed to the pain of childbirth, meanings attributed to birth and meaning of being a mother, grouped into subcategories. Highlights is the largest number of women pointing negative aspects in the categories meanings attributed to childbirth, feelings experienced in childbirth, and meanings attributed to the pain of childbirth; and the largest number of women pointing positive aspects to the categories birth, and meaning of being a mother. For ease of reading we chose to present first in the table, the subcategories of largest absolute value.

**Table 2. Categories and Respective Subcategories** (Continue...)

CATEGORIES	SUBCATEGORIES	Portuguese	Immigrant	Total
Meanings attributed to delivery	<b>Negative:</b>			
	Give birth is pain	6	20	26
	A difficult experience	10	14	24
	A long time waiting	7	14	21
	Suffering	5	11	16
	<b>Positive:</b>			
	A good and unforgettable experience	8	14	22
	A fast event	2	13	15
	Birth of a child	2	6	8
	A natural event	1	7	8
	Culmination of pregnancy and the beginning of a new stage of life	2	4	6
	The moment one knows their child	2	4	6
	Preparation for birth	0	3	3
Feelings of the woman regarding childbirth	<b>Negative:</b>			
	Fear	6	16	22
	Tiredness	4	4	8
	Anxiety at the time of birth itself	3	5	8
	Anxiety to know if the baby is perfect	2	3	5
	<b>Positive:</b>			
	Satisfaction with the progress of childbirth	3	7	10
	Joy	5	5	10
	Relief	3	6	9
	Happiness	1	6	7
	Emotion	5	1	6
Meanings attributed to labour pains	<b>Negative:</b>			
	It's a horrible pain	7	20	27
	It's a pain one has to endure	4	13	17
	<b>Positive:</b>			
	It is a bearable pain	7	16	23
	It is a forgettable pain	4	8	12
	It is a rewarding pain	1	4	5
	It's a necessary pain	1	4	5

CATEGORIES	SUBCATEGORIES	Portuguese	Immigrant	Total
Meanings attributed to birth	<b>Negative:</b>			
	Anxiety	1	4	5
	<b>Positive:</b>			
	Happiness	6	26	32
	Life	8	11	19
	Inexplicable	4	8	12
	To see the child for the first time	4	7	11
	Wonderful	4	7	11
	Very good	3	7	10
	Beautiful	1	8	9
	A miracle	2	7	9
	Giving birth	2	5	7
	Change in life	2	5	7
	Family	2	4	6
	Culmination of pregnancy and a dream	4	2	6
	Love	2	3	5
	Hear the baby cry	2	2	4
	Give meaning to life	1	3	4
	Everything	1	2	3
	Responsibility	2	1	3
	A grand moment	0	3	3
	To be able to have children	1	2	3

Fonte: O Autor

Following are the different categories with some examples of registration units/speeches of the participants, revealing the subcategories presented.

According to the results obtained in this study, the meanings attributed by Portuguese and immigrant women took positive and negative dimensions for the participants. The "**Meanings attributed to childbirth**" category emerged in the discourses of Portuguese immigrants and women in four subcategories of negative dimension and seven of positive dimension. As shown in Table 2, the negative dimension had a greater weight for participants, and "*to give birth is pain*", reported by 26 women, was made by the Portuguese and immigrants proportionally. However, the subcategories *a difficult experience*, *a long waiting time*, and *suffering* were more emphasized by the Portuguese women.

In some parts of childbirth I even went into shock and blacked out, I do not remember all of my labor. That actually was a very bad part, of much suffering (BD Portugal).

Childbirth is pain, because my delivery was horrible (BH Portugal).

It was a very difficult birth (...) I will not have any more children, I will stick to this one, because the delivery was a very difficult and painful experience (BH Portugal).

The positive dimension of this category assumed its greatest expression in the subcategories a good and unforgettable experience, enhanced by the Portuguese, and the

subcategory rapid event, more emphasized by immigrants. The birth of a child, culmination of pregnancy, the beginning of a new stage of life, and the moment one meets her child, were most valued by the Portuguese. However, being a natural event, and be the work of preparation for the birth aspects were mentioned by most immigrants. Here are some registration units, exemplifying the different subcategories

Childbirth is the work before he was born (AB France).

Childbirth means two things: the culmination of the stage of pregnancy, of the anxiety created in the mother and the moment of recognition of the process of effectively becoming a mother because until then it's all a bit abstract, at that moment the situation is achieved (CG Portugal).

Childbirth is the moment when I will meet my son (...) then the moment of birth is a really impressive thing, to meet him (CL Portugal).

It's part. Childbirth is a very natural thing (...) A perfectly normal physiological thing that we have not exaggerating to say that it is something from another world, all of us women, we go through this (BS Russia).

The delivery was the most beautiful moment of my life (AO Congo)

The time of delivery involves several feelings, as revealed by some displayed units. The **"Feelings of women in relation to childbirth"** was emphasized in its negative dimension of fear of childbirth, which is accentuated more in Portuguese women in comparison to immigrant women, like the other subcategories of this domain, particularly *fatigue*, *anxiety at the time of delivery itself*, and the *anxiety to know if the baby is perfect*. In the positive dimension the subcategories *satisfaction with the course of labour*, and *Joy*, mentioned more times by the Portuguese, as was *emotion*, the latter has been expressed, sometimes intensely. But the *relief* and *happiness* were more emphasized by immigrants.

In childbirth... I was afraid ... (...) I was afraid that something would not go well during childbirth and it would be bad for her, she would in pain (CM Portugal).

I lost all my strength completely, in childbirth. I could not do anything else (...) When you told me to do force that his head was already out, it was at that precise moment that I was powerless (AQ Portugal).

I was afraid of some malformation detected only at the time (...) there could be something undetected, which we had not known and only at delivery would possible to see (BE Portugal).

Childbirth is a moment of more anxiety (CF China).

I asked my companion and nurses if I was going to die, I was afraid of dying in childbirth (BY Poland).

The birth itself went so well (DC Ukraine).



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By the time the child was born, when I saw him, for example, I had the biggest emotional outbursts that I had ever had (BK Portugal).

When she was born, it was a relief, I finally did it (AM China).

Childbirth is such a joy, such a good feeling (BN Portugal).

Childbirth is moment of happiness (CF China).

In category "**Meanings attributed to the pain of labour**," the pain of labour acquired several meanings, assigned according to the intensity of the women's experience. Twenty-seven women said that the pain of labour was horrible, which was more enhanced proportionally by the Portuguese. Understanding that one *has to endure pain* was reported by seventeen participants by both Portuguese and by immigrant women proportionally.

It is an unbearable pain, we just want to get rid of it, because at that moment it seems eternal. It was horrible, deep (AT Argentina).

The pain of labour was one thing I could not escape. You have to go through it (BE Portugal).

Also in this category, subcategories emerged in the positive dimension. Twenty-three women relate that *the pain was bearable*, which is further emphasized by the Portuguese compared to immigrants, as well as subcategory as *a forgetful pain*. As for subcategories is *a rewarding pain*, and is *a necessary pain* were equally valued by Portuguese and immigrants women. In this sense, the suffering caused by pain was later forgotten and compensated with the birth of the child.

The pain of childbirth is a mixture, it's a pain we have and we know that it will pass. It's a painful pain almost good, a bearable pain, nobody dies (BE Portugal).

We ended up having a more real perception of when to apply the acquired knowledge in preparation for childbirth (...) the baby at the time of contraction is suffering because it gets a little tighter. Therefore, when we feel the contraction, we instantly know how much we will mitigate our suffering, as well as the baby's suffering and then closer to the final stretch of childbirth we also know when should we pull. So the pain turns out to be a help (BE Portugal).

At that moment, when the child is in our hands, we forget the pain ... everything is gone! (CI Brazil).

It does cost a lot, it costs, but then it's worth all the effort, all the suffering (...) she is here now, healthy (DD Cape Verde).

Birth is inherent to life and part of all people and all cultures. The "**Meanings assigned at birth**" was composed primarily by the positive dimension with the largest representation in the subcategory *happiness*, identified thirty-two women, being more prominent with the immigrant women. More valued by immigrants was also the birth as *a beautiful moment*, and as *a great time*. The *birth as a miracle* was also valued by Portuguese and immigrants, as well as *anxiety for the*

*moment. The remaining subcategories as being life, being inexplicable, to see her child for the first time, be wonderful, be good, to be able to give birth, being a change in life, family is constituted, be the culmination of pregnancy and a dream, be love, be hearing a baby's cry; to give meaning to life; it is everything, is responsibility, and to be able to have children* were more valued by the Portuguese women.

Birth is when you see what was a secret, the baby "(AZ Ukraine).

When he was born, I just heard him crying, birth is the baby's cry (AH China).

Birth is life (AO Congo).

The birth is the first step, the beginning of her independence (CM Portugal).

There is no explanation. Other mothers had told me, it was a unique sensation (BD Portugal).

With the birth we are finally a family (AY Canada).

His birth opened my door, opened my head, made me have a different view of life (...) with the birth of my son I see life with more responsibility (AF Brazil).

Birth is a wonderful thing, but only those who pass through the situation can tell, because each has its own way of interpreting and living it. But it is something really magnificent, superb even (BD Portugal).

Birth is an enormous happiness, because I stopped being pregnant and I became a mother and it is very good, the feeling is indisputable (BE Portugal).

It is an incomparable feeling of love (BL Portugal).

## Discussion

Categories that emerged in this study encompassed the meanings and feelings related to childbirth, the meanings attributed to pain in labour and the birth, which were perceived as either positively or negatively by Portuguese and immigrant women. Whereas childbirth is not just a mechanical process of giving birth to a baby, one seeks to understand the meaning from the experiences of the study participants.

The "Meanings attributed to childbirth" category highlighted by the negative dimension, with relevance to pain, both for immigrants and Portuguese women. The delivery was also considered a difficult experience, with long waiting and suffering. However, this experiment assumes a positive dimension to finalize a cycle of waiting and uncertainty, with the arrival of a being awaited by the family and the beginning of a new stage in life. In this sense, these meanings in its dimensions were also reflected in feelings attributed to childbirth, especially fear, which was

more prevalent in Portuguese women. In the positive feelings prevailed satisfaction, joy, relief and happiness, which also resulted from the end of the delivery and from the first contact with the baby.

According to Kitzinger (1995), pregnancy is a time of preparation for childbirth and motherhood, in which the child is soothed by the mother's body at birth but the mother knows her child without yet knowing yet.

For many women, the last stage of pregnancy is considered a period of preparation for a (mother/baby) separation, which is completed with the delivery. It is often characterized by a heightened anxiety due to the anticipated delivery. In this phase there is an ambivalence of feelings, in which the will the woman has to see her child and the will for the conclusion of pregnancy, coexists simultaneously with the desire to prolong, to postpone the moment of birth and the new requirements that come with the birth (Canavarro, 2001). Also according to Kitzinger (1995), labour is the moment when you meet the child, even if it is, at first, knowing only their physical, real aspect, as a palpable human being. The duration of labour and delivery can also be one of the factors that influences the meaning attributed to its experience, making them pleasant or unpleasant, according to the woman who is experiencing them.

Whether by positive or less pleasant aspects, for women, the birth experience is deeply marked. Years after this experience, it was found that the grandparents or great-grandparents, when questioned, recalled accurately the details of the delivery and the time of birth of their child. Thus, the moment of birth, should never be summed up to the physiological aspects, it is extremely important to appreciate how a woman feels during and after this experience and the effects it has on her (Kitzinger, 1995). Whatever the reason that the relative satisfaction with childbirth is associated to, independently of how women want it to be called, is something of utmost importance and should not be neglected, but cherished.

The body is only one part of whole that makes a person, and for this person - in this case, the woman – childbirth has a fundamental emotional meaning. The psychological factors related to it are as important as the physiological criteria, considering the meaning attributed by women to their birth experience (Lowdermilk & Perry, 2008; Ruano, Prohaska, Tavares, & Zugaib, 2007). Thus, the feelings of women in relation to childbirth, as well as the meaning attributed to pain felt in labour, vary unconditionally according to the each experience, and the emotional meaning attributed to childbirth, is present in the meanings attributed to this moment.

It should be noted the importance of the woman retains from her labour experience. The pain experienced by many women at this point should not be underestimated. However, given the intensity of this moment for the mother, she can transfer the pain to the background, because she does not consider it as important as having the child. Still, the strength of uterine contractions and all the labour itself, causes tiredness, loss of strength, and exhaustion to the women.

Despite significant advances in biomedical obstetric specialty, contributing to the course of a properly supervised and monitored pregnancy (Soifer, 1986), persists in some women, the feeling of anxiety to know if her baby is perfect. Also, a state of anxiety about childbirth is often a way of expressing the fear of pain of labour, of going through a traumatic childbirth, of death during the same or the fear of the birth of a child with malformations undetected during pregnancy (Correia & Linhares, 2007; Soifer, 1986).

Throughout pregnancy, women worry about the pain they may experience during labour and delivery and how they will react and deal with this pain (Almeida et al., 2012; Lowdermilk & Perry, 2008). Given the pain experienced during childbirth and according to her experience, every woman attaches particular significance to it. Despite the pain threshold being similar in all people, regardless of differences of gender, social, ethnic or culture, these are the differences that influence how each person, while being an individual, will perceive pain. The manifestation of pain and its forms of expression are learned in interactions within the primary social group, so the cultural expression of pain varies from woman to woman (Lowdermilk & Perry, 2008). The pain of labour is then influenced by a variety of factors, such as culture, fear, anxiety, experience of previous births, the birth preparation and support that women have that moment being lived an exclusive and unique for each form. Increased pain of labour is also related with the anxiety and fear that the mother feels. When in excess, anxiety causes increased muscle tension, which in turn enhances pain. Thus, as fear and anxiety increase, muscle tension increases, decreases the effectiveness of uterine contractions, increases the experience of discomfort and starts a cycle of increasing fear and anxiety (Lally, Murtagh, Macphail, & Thomson, 2008; Lowdermilk & Perry, 2008; Mazoni, Carvalho, & Santos, 2013; Santana, Gallo, Ferreira, Quintana, & Marcolin, 2013).

According to the results, it appears that the pain experienced by women during labour, results in the accumulation of a variety of factors, including physiological, psychological and socio-cultural stimuli, which in turn causes sensations that vary from woman to woman and also that for the same woman, they vary in different childbirths and births (Almeida et al., 2012; Marques, 2009; Santana et al., 2013).

Birth is a very important milestone in the life of the woman/couple/family, inevitably inducing change, family reorganization and an increase of responsibility (Mendes, 2009; Velho et al., 2012). In this study, the positive dimension of birth prevailed for participants in general. Anxiety was the only negative dimension, associated with the birth. The anxiety has been related to the fact that during the time of pregnancy, women tend to fancy the moment will see your child for the first time. After delivery, she will finally see and meet her baby, that despite the constant presence, is, in a way, a stranger to her (Soifer, 1986).

As the meaning of birth appeared similarly the meaning to give birth, in that maternity goes beyond the biological process of delivery, but assumes the cultural symbolism of giving birth (Fidalgo & Paul, 2003; Ruano et al., 2007). For women in general, being a mother is very important, both individually and marital and social, so that the experience of infertility is traumatic and striking. The inability to have a child, can cause immense sadness, leading to detachment and isolation from people for whom this is possible (Leal, 2005).

According to Kitzinger (1995), crying is a form of a child to greet his mother at birth, which corroborates the meaning assigned at birth by some participants, defining it as "hear the baby crying."

As recognized, the birth implies change and impact on life and even, in spite of being a desired baby, the beginning of this new life alters the existing reality so far significantly and irreversibly (Leal, 2005). Some women, faced with motherhood, reflect a sense of accomplishment that exceeds expectations and fears of being a mother. Being a mother is seen as an existential experience of being in full, more noticeable after the baby's birth (Mendes, 2009). With the birth emerges a feeling of fullness and also the "reality" family, detected in this study. One often questions a couple whether they already started a family, meaning, if they already have children, because the family system, with character of permanence, only exists from the birth of a child (Canavarro, 2001). A feeling of increased responsibility develops in the woman, toward the life that she (and the father) brought forth. This step requires an ability to give, decentralizing oneself, and this challenge may acquire and develop positive aspects like personal. and also as a mother, fulfillment or be considered as an obligation, due to having someone who is from that moment, completely dependent on you (Canavarro, 2001). Mothers have a sense of responsibility towards the new life; this feeling that starts at a very early stage, in the beginning of the pregnancy (Darvill & Farrand, 2008), as mentioned by the study participants.

The birth of a child is perceived as an event that causes a large intra-and interpersonal impact (Mendes, 2009), and thus is considered a grand moment. While a process that starts a new life and changes the identity, roles and functions of the woman/mother and the whole family, the birth (Canavarro, 2001; Velho et al., 2012), was synonymous with happiness for many of this study participants. It is often experienced as an emotional and physical shock, as most of the women who experienced this, acknowledge and reveals having had numerous sentiments, including happiness, joy and pride for her baby (Leal, 2005). The mother is submerged in a sense of active participation in the world of creation, considering birth an intensely opulent, full and incomprehensibly wonderful experience (Kitzinger, 1995).

The reality of the woman is transformed, at the moment of birth of her child and being a mother is like a unique and immensely abysmal adventure. On the other hand, motherhood is as a process that never ends, because although the children grow, the mother continues to be a mother forever, even when dying, leaving or distancing herself from her children. Thus, motherhood is also a means for the most extraordinary experience of love that exists, in which the woman feels as she is contributing to the eternal cycle of life (Rodrigues, 2008).

## Conclusion

This study aimed to understand the meanings attributed to childbirth, the labour pain and birth, by Portuguese and immigrant women, and uncover the meanings and feelings experienced by the woman who becomes a mother.

The meaning of the experiences of labour and birth resulted from the experiences of each woman. However, there is a certain ambivalence of feelings, as fear, pain and suffering coexist with feelings of joy, satisfaction, excitement and happiness, because of having a child. These were remarkable experiences with intense multiple impacts in the life of each woman. The pain of labour assumed a very important role in how the experience of childbirth was experienced and later remembered and reported. In turn, the birth although it can be lived with anxiety, always took a positive slope. It was understood as the culmination of pregnancy and a dream, which gives meaning to life, being inexplicable and a miracle, with the constitution of the family and increased responsibility, a moment of beauty with happiness and love.

Understand the meanings and feelings experienced by mothers in such important events of their lives, such as the labour and birth, empowers nurses/specialists in maternal health and

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obstetrics to appreciate not only the physical aspects, such as pain relief for labour birth, but to have another perception of dimension of care, with respect for the personality of the woman, of their previous obstetric experiences, and cultural, social aspects, among others, enabling them to live more rewarding and healthy experiences.

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